



Discerning the Role of the Narrative in Strategy Development

Lieutenant Colonel David T. Culkin, U.S. Army

“Not only was there a schizophrenic concept regarding the strategic and operational level objectives and priorities, the ways the German army would be employed were contentious.”

— U.S. Joint Forces Command, 2010.¹

DURING THE HECTIC years of 1940 and 1941, a strategic disagreement among German military staff officers and their civilian leaders grew into an infeasible strategy. Operation Barbarossa was handicapped from the outset, caught between Hitler’s intent to destroy Russian manpower and seize the Caucasus oilfields and his General Staff’s desire to make Moscow the objective of the main effort.² Because of this discord, the operational preparations and ultimately the tactical execution of Barbarossa failed. While some may argue about degrees of operational success, there was no shared strategic vision or narrative linked to Barbarossa’s military objectives. Furthermore, a reluctance to discuss diverse perspectives inevitably crippled any operational momentum German divisions might have had. The failure to forge a strategic narrative spelled disaster on the battlefield.

Yet, developing strategies and narratives is not a mystery. There is a misconception that strategic planning is an amalgam of big ideas writ large on white boards by an elite crew of experts isolated from extrinsic realities as well as their own organizations. While policy emanates from top-level authorities and compels strategic leaders to act within set parameters to achieve specific goals, strategy is a more pragmatic process that involves dialogue and results in action.³

“Strategy” typically refers to the normative ends-ways-means paradigm describing, in author Ronald Tobias words, a “unified course of action that guides . . . decisions about what choices to make.”⁴ Strategy affects all operational participants and is meaningless when national policy is decoupled from actions on the ground. This disconnect becomes even more problematic for those who believe that the U.S. no longer possesses a grand strategic narrative to answer the question, “Where is the U.S. headed?”⁵ Strategy is both an object and a process. As one scholar said, it “seeks synergy and symmetry of objectives, concepts, and resources to increase the probability of policy

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PHOTO: Germans inspect Russian planes during Operation Barbarossa in 1941. The plane in the front is a Yakovlev UT-1 and the one in the back is a Polikarpov I-16. (Polish Archive, Marek Tuszyński’s Collection).

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success and the favorable consequences that follow from that success.”⁶ A strategist, then, links policy to operational planning. He or she attempts this by effectively merging creative methods from literary theory with conceptual models to formulate meaningful narratives. The story must describe how the ends-ways-means outlined will produce the desired effects in time and space. Linking these conceptual frameworks to realistic application requires developing and personally selling the *strategic narrative* that describes how the ways and means accomplish the ends. It provides the blueprint for success, but it does not guarantee victory.

The strategic narrative is a powerful conceptual tool because it enables leaders to perform the critical function of translating concepts into a logical framework that outlines the organization’s plan of action. Leaders can apply it flexibly to volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous environments. Because the narrative is conceptual in nature, some may eschew it and dismiss it as academic and impractical. They do so at their organizations’ peril. Indeed, as in the World War II example above, an inadequate narrative at the strategic level which is poorly conveyed can be more detrimental to

mission success than tactics conducted flawlessly that result in strategic blunders. Policy adequately devised translates into effective operations that can save thousands of lives. The narrative is a critical element because it enables strategic leaders to link policy to operational design in a logical way.

What is a Strategic Narrative?

According to strategists David Barry and Michael Elmes, the strategic narrative is a flexible sense-making tool that uses language to “construct meaning [and] . . . explore . . . ways in which organizational stakeholders create a discourse of direction . . . to understand and influence one another’s actions.”⁷ It attempts to tell the story of a complex problem so that staffs can better understand the environment and leaders make decisions that are more effective. As Venkatesh Rao reiterates in his blog, the challenge is “to develop conceptual models that frame large-scale collective decision making in narrative terms, and effective approaches to synthesis and better decisions based on storytelling.”⁸ While some theorists argue that narratives are invalid decision-making vehicles because they introduce bias, narrative thought is inherent to the



German troops invade Russia, 1941.

human experience, influencing perceptions, biases, and decisions.⁹ The narrative enables strategists to better understand their environments and link operations to approaches that support their collective interests. Narratives use sense and language to explore unique situations in which strategies can emerge.

Strategists do not start with a draft plan or a blank slate. They rely upon knowledge gained through experience, education, training, and reflection and apply these attributes to their environment to make sense of it. Critical questions are excellent tools with which one can gain deeper understanding. For example, what element must precede another to achieve a desired effect? What elements are concurrent? What are the key networks of players who exert power in a given system? What are the causes and symptoms of the problem?

As strategists iteratively seek the answers to these questions, they refine their understanding of the problem facing their organizations. This does not, however, guarantee that others—particularly those who have not participated in the collaboration—share their understanding. To jump from the

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basic concept to a common vision requires something more intimate—writing for one another.

The art of crafting a strategic narrative entails answering a fundamental question: How do the critical ingredients fit together in appropriate proportions to create a synergized whole? As with fiction writing, strategy integrates threads of a complex situation—including those of adversaries and other stakeholders—to elicit a meaningful narrative helping to explain the way ahead. In this context, a strategic narrative is necessary to create a logical framework, a pattern of meaning.¹⁰ It is effective when it is so understandable the audience can act upon it—that is, execute an operational plan. A strategic narrative that is too detailed and prescriptive risks restricting creativity and initiative and allowing adversaries to

adapt relatively quickly.¹¹ Indeed, strategy divorced from reality becomes inflexible and thus doomed to fail. In complex environments, an open mindset is a critical requirement.¹² The strategist has a unique opportunity to create luck for his or her own organization without being limited by the means.

To forge a strategic vision, the strategist must work with policy makers and decision makers to understand and then be able to describe the environment. Understanding, visualizing, and describing strategic concepts—via a narrative of some sort—is known in U.S. doctrine as *mission command*. It enables military commanders to direct their forces to accomplish objectives at all levels in support of sometimes-vague national policy and interests. Strategists must link policy narratives to strategic narratives by writing fiction where intelligence and guidance fall short and help strategic leaders interact with leaders at every level so that policy is not only understood but also implemented. Clearly, one must describe the key actors (characters), their specific environment (setting), key series of linked events (patterns of action), and how conflicts resolve or terminate—all within a logical framework (plot) so that the actions taken will support policy enacted.

Once a strategist drafts a narrative, a commitment has occurred, a commitment to a specified problem and to devoting organizational resources to solve it. On another level, the narrative also commits strategists to each other and to their senior decision makers by deliberately attempting to develop and articulate concepts that will design and pave their future course. In military planning, such design ideas often translate into commander's guidance, a description of military end states and termination criteria, and ultimately commander's intent.¹³

Planning involves a methodical process of linking options to facts and assumptions. Strategy sets the stage for planning operations in which operators can take action. The German army learned this relationship the hard way. In preparing for Operation Barbarossa, they did not develop a cogent strategy; and senior leaders never voiced their concerns about the disparity between Hitler's strategic guidance and the direction of their planning. The result was a failure to attain operational objectives and the misapplication of innovative tactical means such as the mismatch between means and ways.

Divisions in strategic and operational approaches were papered over in silence during the final planning stages for the invasion, but quickly came into the open once the campaign achieved its initial objectives of defeating the Soviet Red Army in the border regions and German panzer formations leapt into the Russian interior.¹⁴

Simply writing down and coming to some agreement about the strategic expectations may have produced very different results. Strategists and operational commanders continue to struggle to develop and translate strategic guidance.

Leaders Must Get Buy-In

A strategy, written to perfection, will be ineffectual if leaders do not personally engage their superiors, peers, and subordinates in a meaningful dialogue. The required levels of human interaction at all levels make “writing strategy” one of the most difficult and significant of political-military pursuits. Some social disciplines are just recognizing the import of using narratological tools to help leaders conceptualize organizational and procedural changes over time.¹⁵ Strategic leaders need to interact with key individuals all the way to the “decision implementers” to ensure their vision is integrated and actualized.¹⁶

Strategists can play a critical role by linking policy to operations through the narrative. For instance, General Petraeus, as the commander of multinational forces in Afghanistan, saw his primary job as getting the “big ideas right” and then articulating them to his subordinate commanders.¹⁷ Only through this collegial dialogue would he realistically earn their understanding and commitment. This task would obviously become more difficult with more persons and decision points. However, through such personal interface, a strategic leader can facilitate the implementation of strategy. Jeffrey L. Pressman and Aaron Wildavsky have also shown that those big ideas, which more simply describe the strategic requirements of an organization, are more likely to be successfully implemented.¹⁸ The narrative’s role, then, is to clearly convey those strategic concepts so that the operators will *choose* to support and implement them. The degree to which leaders make such choices indicates the level of strategic success achieved during recent operations.

When a Combatant Command Works with a Joint Task Force

In the spring of 2011, the commander of U.S. Africa Command, a combatant command with responsibility for much of the continent, faced a unique challenge. His predecessor had established a joint task force commanded by his principal naval commander with the purpose of preventing a humanitarian crisis in Libya.¹⁹ Backed with the authority of United Nations Security Council Resolutions 1970 and 1973, the task force and several coalition partners executed its tactical mission expertly: missile strikes from ships and air, coordinated maritime maneuvers, and multinational contingency planning. What made the mission complex was the disparity between political goals and military objectives at the strategic level.

While Secretary of Defense Gates acknowledged that one political goal was regime change, he admitted that the president was not ready to add that to the list of objectives pursued by U.S. Africa Command.²⁰ This strategic disparity presented a challenge to task force planners who had to present alternate courses of action and resource options. Furthermore, the strategic “gap” was not substantially addressed anywhere other than in the media. Hence, cable networks were a valuable source of strategic guidance. In these circumstances, when the strategic narrative was not explicit, the task force commander was asked to conduct tactical operations that were not deliberately linked to strategy. The task force achieved the objectives on the tactical level because of excellent training, operational planning, and experience in coalition operations. On the strategic level, the handoff to a NATO task force was not as clear partly because of the initial obfuscation of the policy. As of this writing, the NATO operation continues.

As an experiment and an attempt to better understand this strategic complexity, I applied the nascent doctrinal concept of design methodology. As we asked fundamental questions concerning the environment and the problem, an operational approach emerged. What is the current environment? What is the desired environment? What problem prevents our organization from achieving the desired environment? What is the description of the way to achieve the desired environment by attacking the problem?



(U.S. Army, SGT Russell Gilchrest)

Soldiers from the 450th Civil Affairs Battalion walk with Afghan children through the village of HeydarKheyl, Sayed-Abad District, Wardak Province, Afghanistan, 25 March 2010.

The methodology incorporates creative and critical thinking to produce a design concept articulated in graphic and narrative forms. Applying the methodology, I crafted written responses to the questions in the previous paragraph, proposed conditions if NATO or a non-NATO agency took over the coalition, and suggested a command structure and relationships diagram based upon anticipated strategic requirements. This was a strategic-level mission narrative which did help inform ongoing planning efforts at the combatant command headquarters. Perhaps future strategists will more expertly apply the narrative tool to inform decision makers who must translate nebulous policy into operational plans.

A “Strategic” Command Leading Multi-National Operations?

October 2012 marked 11 years that U.S. forces have been waging war in Afghanistan. For a slightly shorter period of time, coalition and allied forces under the auspices of NATO worked hard to promote security and stability in a fledgling nation struggling with the still-fresh wounds from thirty years of strife. In this most complex of strategic environments, how

can the strategic narrative influence the military campaign plan for the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF)?

The International Security Assistance Force is a strategic-theater command, and its operating area is essentially the land mass and airspace of Afghanistan. In this lead-nation, parallel command structure, the ISAF commander (an American) receives guidance and reports to both the NATO secretary general and the U.S. president. It can be daunting for planners to sift through often-conflicting policies from these two authorities—not to mention every troop-contributing nation. It can be tempting to defer to past guidance or ignore the strategic reality. For example, it would be relatively straightforward to focus on reconciling with former insurgents as a military line of effort. However, that would disregard the reality that many insurgent organizations refuse to ever reconcile with NATO forces, especially when the coalition’s political end state is a drawdown over the next several years. Assuming this context is accurate, would a purely conciliatory policy be feasible and practicable?

When a few planners in this staff environment sat down to write a strategic narrative, the campaign

plan changed dramatically in a short period of time. Assumptions became more fleshed out, because the insurgents were receiving support from both internal and external sources. Kinetic operations and influence initiatives suddenly expanded beyond the scope of specific provinces or groups. Planners could then craft an estimate that holistically described the strategic context, something not available before. Just asking a few well-chosen questions often makes the difference between innovative success and a version of “the last plan.”

With this in mind, what are some key questions to probe a civil-military environment at the strategic level? The answer to this question largely depends upon the individual experience, education, intuition, and courage of a corps of practitioners who want to see the environment clearly for what it is. Questions vary, but they can build upon those derived from the design methodology (and can closely resemble the fiction-writing approach) previously mentioned:

- Who are the key actors (cast of characters)?
- How do they relate to each other—in terms of time and space—and the environment in which they act (setting)?
- What motivates the key players, and what are their desired effects (theme—focus and patterns of thought)?
- Do we have the resources and will to influence the actors? Which ones (setting, props)?
- Why do they behave in the ways they do (theme, patterns of action)?
- What are the various tensions, opportunities, and obstacles related to us achieving our desired environment?

● What are the possible ways to achieve and organize this environment (plot and resolution)?

● How can we influence key actors who will help implement the strategy (plot and resolution)?

The answers to these questions help strategists develop a deeper and shared understanding of their organizations’ strategic contexts. The written version of this is the strategic narrative. Employed as a means for leaders to gain the commitment of key stakeholders, it can make the difference between success and failure in implementing strategy.

Eliciting Commitment

The strategic narrative links policy to strategy to military objectives in a logical framework by outlining the plan of action for organizations. Military leaders today have the opportunity to synthesize literary theory with strategic concepts to create unique narratives that help us to address complex problems and create success on the battlefield. We have even made some progress in recognizing the need for a grand strategic narrative to replace containment.²¹ But it must not end there: strategic leaders must elicit commitment all the way from the decision maker to the decision implementer. If the Germans had had a coherent strategic narrative in 1941, Operation Barbarossa might have turned out differently, or not even have occurred. If Hitler had engaged in a true dialogue with his generals, would German now be the *lingua franca* in Moscow today? We will never know, but it is certain that “a battle fought without strategy is nearly always lost.”²² **MR**

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